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JESUIT EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN EL SALVADOR

CHARLES J. BEIRNE, S.J. GARLAND PUBLISHING, INC., 1996.

Reviewed by Shane P. Martin, S.J.

Throughout its 450-year history, the Society of Jesus has made a unique contribution to the field of education. Historically, Jesuit education offered a systematic approach that emphasized the education of the whole person. Since the post-Vatican II Jesuit Congregations, the importance of faith and justice was added to the traditional characteristics of Jesuit education. Perhaps no other Jesuit institution has embodied the faith and justice perspective more than the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in El Salvador, whose events are chronicled in a comprehensive and engaging book by Charles J. Beirne, S.J.

Founded in 1965 to combat the influence of communism, the UCA was led by a team of Jesuits and lay colleagues. By the 1970's the mission of the university developed to embrace a social justice agenda that was clearly outlined by the UCA's most prominent thinker, Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J., who served as a board member throughout the 1970's and as rector (president) throughout the 1980's. In November 1989 six of the UCA Jesuits, including the rector, vice-rector, several board of trustees members, and department chairs, were brutally murdered in the Jesuit residence along with two women lay colleagues. Although the assassins tried to silence the influence of the university, Beirne powerfully recounts the role of the UCA in working for social change in El Salvador. The book is passionate, insightful, and challenging. It has much to say to Catholic higher education in the United States.

The author was the academic vice president of Santa Clara University at the time of the assassinations and responded to the subsequent call of the Jesuit superior general to become a vice-rector of the UCA in 1990. A long-time personal friend and colleague of the UCA Jesuits, Beirne has written a book rich with personal communication and the key insights of a participant observer. He had extraordinary access to the private correspondence in the Jesuit archives, as well as many personal interviews with the main participants. These personal sources of data, coupled with his own experience as a Jesuit working at the UCA, add great credibility and depth to the work. The author develops the book by providing a brief historical overview of the social, political, and religious background of El Salvador and the UCA; by discussing the role of a university; and by examining the forces that led to the development of the UCA model (1969-1975) and the events that led up to the Ellacuria rectorship (1975-1979). The discussion then focuses on the

Ellacuria era, which began in 1979 and ended with the assassinations in 1989. The historical background provides a useful context for the discussion of the UCA model, because it is significant that the model developed as a response to the reality of El Salvador—political oppression, military rule, death squads, and brutal poverty.

Despite initial growing pains and tensions between more traditional and progressive forces, the mission and model of the UCA that eventually emerged was profound for its vision of Catholic higher education. The university saw itself first and foremost as a university with a specific moral purpose—to respond to the reality of the poor and oppressed in El Salvador. However, the method of responding was to be in a university fashion, with a strong emphasis on research, publications, teaching, public policy development, and social outreach that addressed the roots of the systemic social injustice of the country and the region. Refusing to be used by either the left or the right, the UCA responded as an institution to the oppression in order to promote social change in the country.

Although it must be difficult to analyze objectively the work of recent political martyrs who are considered saints and heroes to many, Beirne does a credible job in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the UCA model. Certainly its strengths are noteworthy and many. The UCA university press and its numerous scholarly journals became the major academic voice in the region from the 1970's to the present. This was especially significant during the civil war, when studies conducted by the UCA provided a sharp contrast with governmental statistics and analyses. The UCA called for a negotiated settlement to the civil war as early as 1982, and many of the major ideas for peace that the UCA put forth at that time were incorporated in the 1992 Peace Accords that ended the war. Ellacuria and his companions made a major contribution to the peace process, although they did not live to see the reality of peace.

In terms of critique, Beirne notes that the leadership was entrusted to too few people, a reality that became dramatically apparent after the assassinations. Additionally, he suggests that the UCA model paid too little attention to the spiritual, social, or moral development of its students, deciding instead to focus its limited resources in the areas of research, public policy development, and social outreach programs. As Beirne indicates, perhaps the above approach made the most sense given the dramatic life-and-death struggle that was the daily reality for many in El Salvador, but one wonders how such an approach fully honored the Jesuit tradition of educating the whole person and forming men and women who are agents of social change.

In the final discussion, Beirne points to one of the most outstanding features of the UCA model—a clear university vision. However one evaluates the university's mission statement, it was unambiguous and guided all decisions. As Beirne says, the vision of the UCA was to be a critical and creative

conscience for the nation, and to dedicate all of its academic resources toward the building of a just society.

Although the sociopolitical, sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts are different, the model of the UCA has much to say to Catholic higher education in the United States. What would happen if Catholic higher education focused its considerable academic resources on the social justice problems of our day? What would happen if efforts in research, scholarship, teaching, and service were united in seeking solutions to homelessness, poverty, immigration, and racial and ethnic inequality? What would the impact be if institutions of Catholic higher education became unwavering advocates for the poor and marginalized in our society? As Charlie Beirne indicates in his stimulating and well-crafted book, the martyrs of the UCA call those who work in Catholic higher education to reflect on these questions.

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